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Promoting participatory Innovation Systems for Smallholder Development

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It is generally accepted that smallholders, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) control vast land, water and human resources, and feed large numbers of people. They have not been able to increase their yields. Production growth to keep up with the expanding population has been the result of taking new land into cultivation, or of reducing fallow periods, which leads to land degradation.

Since the 1970s, ARD has assumed a linear impact pathway that features scientific discovery, delivery and finally utilisation of technologies by 'end users'. This pathway has little to show for on the ground. In SSA, the 'Green Revolution' has failed to take off, largely because of pervasive institutional and political biases against the small farm sector. ARD has ignored the conditions that enable sustainable intensification of smallholder farming. As a result, the productive resources under smallholder control remain under-utilised. Food imports are increasing and food security is uncertain.

In the US and Western Europe it took some 50 to 100 years to establish the conditions that enable productivity growth. For example, the Dutch Land Tenure Law of 1917 allowed tenants to invest in land without fear of it being taken away from them but it was only in the 1960s that grain productivity took off. CoS-SIS is among a host of programmes that seeks to develop alternative innovation pathways that do address enabling conditions. Key elements are:

System analysis not only of agro-ecological or farming systems, but also of the institutions (e.g., price formation, the integrity of seed systems, access to value chains, conflicts between herders and farmers, land tenure, corruption) that govern agricultural domains (the arenas for negotiating institutional change).

Entry points for action. Their participatory selection is based on sound information about smallholders' conditions, but also scopes opportunity (e.g., analyses international markets, value chains, urban markets, new technologies). Entry point selection is an exercise in 'visioning' and entrepreneurship.

Innovation Platforms are temporary forums that allow stakeholders in a domain at local, district and national levels, to interact and decide on concerted action to remove constraints, create opportunities, etc., as identified during entry point selection, further specified through diagnostic studies.

Institutionalisation. Deliberate strategies to embed the results that were experimentally developed in niches into the existing institutional regimes.

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